

## POLITENESS STRATEGIES: COMPLIMENTS

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### Abstract

The present article is a modified version of the paper read at the conference in Hradec Králové in 2006 in which I would like to share partial outcomes of my long-term research in linguistic politeness, namely compliments. In this thumb-nail sketch the focus is on structural properties of English compliments, the comparison of compliment topics in English and Czech and different variables influencing the choice of a compliment response. The final part of the article discusses compliments as an inseparable part of methodology strategies.

### 1 Introduction

My contribution, contextualized into the theoretical framework of my previous studies on politeness (Válková 2004, 2005) was inspired by the material excerpted from “Seminar Culture in U.S. Classrooms” by Fanni Liu Coward and Diane L. Schallert from the University of Texas at Austin. Their cross-cultural approach has influenced my decision to study and compare strategies that signal politeness in English and in Czech. The authors state that foreign students encounter several common difficulties in American seminar classrooms, one of them being politeness strategies. According to the authors many international students come to the United States with the mistaken belief that the Americans do not worry about the face-threatening effects of what they say. In order to help our students not to repeat the same mistakes and avoid “culture bumps”, it is important to include the component of linguistic politeness into the syllabus and compare the respective languages in both the communicative strategies used and the overt language manifestations preferred. We can only agree with Harmer (1995:25) that it is safe to say that easy, transparent and neutral realizations of a language function are better for students at lower levels whereas difficulty, lack of transparency and extremes of formality (and informality) are more suitable for more advanced students. This makes me believe that our university students are the right audience to be taught “more delicate” politeness strategies, especially if they intend to study abroad.

Another reason why university teachers should think about including the above mentioned politeness domain into their syllabuses is the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages*, incorporating sociolinguistic and pragmatic competences – together with the linguistic competence – into the overall concept of communicative language competence. The above mentioned document does not specify what to do or how to do it but stating the aims that students should achieve, it helps teachers decide what to teach.

It goes beyond the scope of this paper to speak about all politeness strategies (I have already dealt with addressing and apologizing in a cross-cultural perspective in my book – see the References). In this article I want to concentrate on compliments and their structure in English, and introduce preliminary results obtained from questionnaires with the aim to map the situation in Czech. I would also like to analyse the textbooks used at the Faculty of Education in Olomouc from the point of view of their contribution to teaching this particular politeness strategy.

## 2 Compliments

A compliment can be defined as an expression of praise, admiration or respect, in other words the speaker expresses some favorable judgement or opinion, says something nice to another person.

The structure of compliments is considered formulaic and this standpoint is supported by the findings of Manes and Wolfson (1981), who studied the corpus of 686 naturally occurring compliments in American English. The majority of their corpus belonged to one of the following structures:

- |    |                                                       |                                                |
|----|-------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------|
| 1) | NP { <i>is, looks</i> } ( <i>really</i> ) ADJ         | <i>Your hair looks nice.</i>                   |
| 2) | <i>I</i> ( <i>really</i> ) { <i>like, love</i> } NP   | <i>I love your hair.</i>                       |
| 3) | PRO <i>is</i> ( <i>really</i> ) ( <i>a</i> ) ADJ NP   | <i>That was really a great meal.</i>           |
| 4) | <i>You</i> V ( <i>a</i> ) ( <i>really</i> ) ADJ NP    | <i>You did a good job.</i>                     |
| 5) | <i>You</i> V (NP) ( <i>really</i> ) ADV               | <i>You really handled that situation well.</i> |
| 6) | <i>You have</i> ( <i>a</i> ) ( <i>really</i> ) ADJ NP | <i>You have such beautiful hair.</i>           |
| 7) | <i>What</i> ( <i>a</i> ) (ADJ) NP!                    | <i>What a lovely baby you have!</i>            |
| 8) | ADJ (NP)!                                             | <i>Nice game!</i>                              |
| 9) | <i>Isn't</i> NP ADJ!                                  | <i>Isn't your ring beautiful!</i>              |

(Manes & Wolfson 1981: 120)

Their results confirmed that 53.6 per cent of the whole corpus made use of the first syntactic pattern, the second and third patterns accounted an additional 16.1 and 14.9 per cent respectively. The formulaic nature of compliments makes them identifiable in any context, which might be very important for non-native speakers in helping them react correctly.

The positive-polarity semantic load is usually carried by adjectives (546 compliments of the whole corpus), the most common being *nice*, *good*, *beautiful*,

*pretty* and *great* (together with sixty-seven other adjectives which occurred only once or twice). The range of semantically positive verbs is rather limited in comparison with the adjectives. Those which do occur in the corpus are *like*, *love*, *admire*, *enjoy*, and *be impressed by*. Surprisingly rare are the compliments where the positive element is an adverb (e.g. *You do this kind of writing so well*) or a noun (e.g. *You're just a whiz at sewing*). Intensifiers can also function as semantically positive items (e.g. *Your talk was the one that really went over*).

The topic of complimenting reveals the values which are positively regarded by particular communities, and the importance of the objects of complimenting in the respective culture.

Herbert (1997) compared complimenting strategies in Polish with the results obtained by Manes and Wolfson (1981) in English. While *appearance* seems to be the most common topic in English (America and New Zealand), Polish data were strikingly different – 50 per cent of the sample concerned the category of *possessions*:

|                        | English | Polish |
|------------------------|---------|--------|
| appearance             | 50.7%   | 32.25% |
| ability/performance    | 30.6%   | 11.75% |
| possessions            | 11.2%   | 49.25% |
| personality/friendship | 4.8%    | 1.25%  |
| other                  | 2.7%    | 2.5%   |

(Herbert 1997: 492)

To obtain relevant data in Czech, I distributed questionnaires among 51 university students in which they were given an example of a compliment in Czech and were asked to list the most recent compliments they had made, received or witnessed. This type of a questionnaire is considered a preliminary one used to collect the data on the most common topics of compliments in Czech and to gather scenarios which will be later used in DCT (discourse-completion-task format questionnaire). I cannot but agree that “questionnaires cannot measure social action, they can only collect self-reports of recalled past action or of prospective or hypothetical action” (Rose and Kwai-fun 2001: 155); but the only relevant way to measure the politeness strategies seem to be pragmatic tests. Having collected 353 compliments in Czech, I divided them into analogous topic-based categories:

|                        | Czech |
|------------------------|-------|
| appearance             | 40%   |
| ability/performance    | 37%   |
| possessions            | 13%   |
| personality/friendship | 5%    |
| other                  | 5%    |

The category of *appearance* could be further divided into subcategories, the most numerous of which would be “the overall impression”, followed by the subcategory “hair”, “figure” – slim but there were even examples of compliments on weight gain, “smile”, “eyes”, etc.

The category of *ability/performance* included compliments on the ability to solve problems, pass an exam, play some instrument, dance, organize a party, draw, drive a car, sing. A fair number of cases was connected with the ability to cook well – not accidentally do the Czechs belong to the most obese nations in Europe, they value this ability by 6 per cent.

*Possessions* mostly referred to things people wear – sweaters, trousers, shoes, coats, glasses, earrings, etc.

The category referring to *personality/friendship* was connected with the positive personal character.

The last category of “*other*” was used for those compliments which did not clearly refer to any of the above mentioned topics or might refer to more than one (e.g. *Jsi zlato! Nádherně voníš! Jseš borec! Tak to je cool! Ty brd'o! Úúúú! Dobry!*).

The overall distribution of Czech compliment topics seems to be closer to English than to Polish. In his explanation of the high number of compliments on possessions Herbert (1997) says that “it is tempting to speculate on the relationship between the high frequency of possession compliments in Polish and life within the consumer-troubled society of Poland under communism” (ibid.: 493). In my opinion, the results might be similar in Czech if the questionnaire had been distributed several years ago when people were still influenced by the same experience or, if it were distributed among people who are 40 and above and who can still remember how difficult it was to acquire the consumer goods. The shift of compliment topics of younger generation may show the shift of culture values and even the “globalising” tendencies in the world.

As mentioned before, I want to use the results of this preliminary questionnaire to prepare scenarios by means of which students will be given concrete situations and will be asked to write what the people would say in these situations and what the reactions might be. This procedure should provide the typical structures of Czech compliments as well as their responses.

So far we may say that the structure of compliments is clear enough not to cause difficulties in the overall system of politeness to be taught in the target language. The comparative study proved the similarity of compliment topics in English and in Czech.

### **3 Compliment responses – different variables**

There are three broad categories of compliment responses: accept, reject and deflect/evoke. Although the type of reaction can vary and in different studies on

compliments different classifications are listed, the authors agree that complete ignoring of a compliment is not acceptable.

An edition of *USA Weekend* suggested the following to people who feel uncomfortable with compliments:

- Be positive. Think of a reason why you deserve a compliment and say to yourself “I’ve earned it.”
- Slow down your automatic urge to reject it.
- Practice some appropriate response ... Try “I appreciate it” or “That’s very nice of you”, and remember ... “Thank you” is always appropriate.

(Herbert 1990: 208)

Before discussing the proper analysis of compliment responses in Czech and comparing the results with English, I would like to mention different variables which can influence the choice of a compliment response: the sex of participants, their age, the cultural background, their social status. These are the most common variables introduced by the researchers who study and compare compliments in various languages.

Fukushima (in Baba 1999) in his study of compliment responses in Japanese found that Japanese women refuse compliments more often than men and explains the situation arguing that Japanese women are obedient to social principles.

Herbert (1990) came to the conclusion that compliments offered by males are more likely to be accepted than compliments offered by females, especially if offered to a female addressee. Female compliments, especially those addressed to other females, tend to meet with a form of disagreement. In general we can say that different reactions of women to compliments may reflect differences in the status of women in different cultures.

Holmes (1995) analysed a corpus of New Zealand compliments, taking into consideration sex and social status of respondents. She suggests that women and men may operate with different socio-pragmatic rules. “Women of higher status are more likely to receive compliments than higher status men, suggesting that complimenter may be more sensitive to the risk of discomfiting higher status men with a face-threatening act” (ibid.: 143). The results Holmes presented in her study suggest that women and men may have very different rules for using and interpreting compliments.

To prove the importance of the cultural background in the choice of a compliment response, Herbert (1990) compared American and South African English speakers. “American speakers accepted only slightly more than one-third of the compliments offered (36.35%), but acceptance was the dominant response among South African speakers (76.26%)” (ibid.: 220).

We can also find differences among speakers of different dialects. Yi (2002) compared his research on compliments and compliment responses in Kunming

Chinese with the results of Chen's research on Mandarin Chinese. As Yi puts it, we can see "a world of difference" (ibid.: 210). While Mandarin speakers tend to reject compliments (over 95% of the data), Kunming speakers tend to deviate from the norm of Chinese society (which is to be modest) and they do accept compliments. The author explains the difference by western influence through films and other media. He also states that his respondents noticed age differences, and the way younger people use compliments is completely different from that of people who are older.

The above mentioned variables will most probably play relevant role in compliment behavior in Czech, and gender, age, status and culture values in the Czech speech community will require a more sensitive approach in the analysis of the Czech corpus (cf. Wierzbicka 1991).

#### **4 Compliments in language teaching**

An excellent study on inductive and deductive teaching of compliments and compliment responses by Rose and Kwai-fun (2001) provides useful data and shows which way is better to develop sociopragmatic proficiency in the target language. (*The terms inductive and deductive are commonly used in grammar teaching and the authors applied them to teaching pragmatics. By induction they understand guided discovery during which students first encounter various examples on the basis of which they are asked several key-questions. The questions lead them to discover and formulate the rule. Deductive teaching means presenting the rule first and then students' application of the rule (exercises, examples) afterwards.*)

The procedure of the whole research was rather complicated so let me introduce briefly the conclusions which, even if tentative, may inspire us. The effective way for developing sociopragmatic proficiency proved to be the deductive instruction. The inductive instruction, on the other hand, had "a negative impact on sociopragmatic development, perhaps by raising difficult issues without providing unambiguous solutions; that is, it may be necessary to provide explicitly the kind of information necessary for learners to develop sociopragmatic proficiency in the target language: by simply raising these issues and allowing learners time to reflect – even in "guided discovery" activities – the above mentioned approach could create more confusion than comprehension" (ibid.: 167). With this in mind I analysed the coursebooks that we use at our department: *Landmark* and *Proficiency Masterclass*.

The level that our students are supposed to achieve is C2.1 according to the Framework. In terms of sociolinguistic competence the user "*has a good command of idiomatic expressions and colloquialisms with awareness of connotative levels of meaning. Appreciates fully the sociolinguistic and sociocultural implications of language used by native speakers and can react accordingly. Can mediate effectively*

*between speakers of the target language and that of his/her community of origin taking account of sociocultural and sociolinguistic differences.*” One of the fields which is dealt with in this section is also politeness, both positive and negative (for details see Brown and Levinson’s *Politeness: Some Universals in Language Usage*, 1987) and competent users of English are expected to use language appropriately. In comparison with native speakers who have a subconscious (tacit) knowledge of language use in second language acquisition politeness should be taught together with grammatical competence and lexical knowledge.

In *Landmark* coursebook the emphasis seems to be on grammar and vocabulary, the information concerning how to use language in a communicatively appropriate way is restricted to discourse markers, “vague” language, interrupting, agreement and disagreement, or expressing opinions in a tentative way.

The *Proficiency* Masterclass coursebook does not differ very much in this respect. There is no organized system of linguistic politeness presented there, only pieces of information appended here and there (e.g. expressing agreement and disagreement) and my impression from the book was confirmed in the discussion with teachers who use this book in their lessons.

To survey the above mentioned findings I have to say that unfortunately there are not enough teaching (instructive) notes in either of the coursebooks that would help teachers and students understand not only *what* the communication is about but *how* people communicate just the way they do and *why*. The reality is different and we can only agree Pichastor who in the article ‘Politeness and textbooks: How to approach the teaching of communicative competence in a second language’ (2004) concludes by saying that

*“there is still a long way before pragmatics can be taught in an organized and principled way so that the learner is presented with a coherent functional syllabus instead of finding bits of politeness strategies scattered along the textbook units without any clear organizing principle.”*

## 5 Conclusion

Compliments and compliment responses as one of the politeness strategies are an inseparable part of language teaching. The comparative study of compliment topics in English and Czech proved similarity in both the languages which may be considered a good guide to cross-language studies. Compliment responses have not been studied in details yet but the above mentioned short overview of different variables influencing the choice of a compliment response suggests that simple analysis of the language corpus in Czech will not be sufficient enough and many more variables will have to be taken into consideration.

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